5.

A LETTER

TO

RICHARD COBDEN, M.P.

ON

FREE TRADE AND SLAVE LABOUR.

RESPECTED FRIEND,

THE actual state and future prospects of the British Colonies in the West Indies make me very desirous to engage a little of thy attention, in order to place before thee some considerations respecting the mode in which the doctrine of Free Trade is now applied in favour of slave-made produce.

In the first place, let me assure thee that I am no Protectionist, in the modern politico-economic sense of the word; that I am, on the contrary, decidedly attached to the doctrine of Free Trade; and so thoroughly averse to exclusive systems and close bodies, that, when a young man, I waved the flattering and advantageous offer of Fellowship in the College of Physicians, the constitution and bye-laws of which I regarded as of too exclusive a character. It is, then, not very likely that I should plead for a defection from principle in favour of others, when I could not sanction it on my own behalf.

My principal object is, to set forth the reasons which, after careful inquiry, have led me to the conviction that the most rigid application of the principles of Free Trade cannot require or sanction the admission and patronage of the produce of Slave Labour; and that this is more particularly the case when such favour is a direct attack on the corresponding productions of free labour. I would next take the liberty of shewing that the expedients which this misapplication of Free-Trade principles has forced upon the Government involve a guilty participation in the African Slave Trade, and

a commission of such an act of inconsistency as must astonish other countries, and be a lasting subject of censure with posterity.

If I am not mistaken, the legitimate advocacy of Free-Trade principles proceeds no further than the breaking down of those national restrictions which interfere with the honest attainment of the very natural wish of human beings to obtain the objects of their necessity or enjoyment, and claims that the means, which they have legitimately acquired for the accomplishment of this object, should not be defeated by the fiscal regulations which the jealousy or short-sightedness of nations may have led them to impose, to the disadvantage and annoyance both of their own people and of their allies. It can never have been intended that Free Trade should abrogate the moral laws which restrain, within the limits of honesty, change of possession between individuals or nations. You would not say—Tolerate the seller of stolen goods, because he supplies his customer at a low price; nor would you encourage the shopkeeper who obtains his stock on credit, and sells it, unpaid for, below the cost of production. Such a tradesman not only defrauds the manufacturer and the wholesale dealer, but takes the bread out of the mouth of his honest neighbour. The customer may think it very agreeable and advantageous to be thus supplied with articles good and cheap, regardless of the fraud and misery by which they are obtained; and he may say—The prisons and the Courts of Common Law and Bankruptcy, which the Government provides to check this supply of cheap articles, are very expensive, and do not completely prevent the evil. Would it not be far better to do away with such restraints, and let everybody take care of his own, or abide the consequences?

I have heard of British goods being sold in foreign markets below the cost of production, to the injury, if not to the ruin, of the British merchant or manufacturer who has trusted his property in them. Perhaps the free trader may think, with the foreign purchaser, that this is an evil out of which good may come; that British goods

would become more widely known and desired through such opportunity of cheap and extensive diffusion; and that, whilst one merchant or manufacturer suffers, many will be benefited, both by extended demand and the lesson of caution. Some such influence might operate; but I have no doubt that the evils would greatly preponderate over any apparent advantages to be derived from such relaxed morality in favour of Free Trade. Such transactions, although unattended with violence, would have very much the character of freebooting.

The encouragement of a commerce in which the Slave Trade and slavery form, not the accidental and occasional attendants, but the essential and well-known elements, appears to me to possess the same criminality as conscious encouragement and participation in the dishonest transactions to which I have alluded. In some respects it is indeed far worse: it does not produce its own remedy, and therefore the evil becomes far more extensive. The warehouse which has once been broken into may be better secured and better watched; and the merchant who has sent his goods to a dishonest foreigner may withhold the supply, or obtain security for the future. But the slave who works without wages one week must continue to do so through the remainder of his life; and the duration of the injustice which he suffers is only shortened by the premature death which its severity may occasion. His fate gives no salutary warning to his fellows. The vacated place is continually filled up by a succession of unconsulted, unwilling substitutes, so long as the unscrupulous customer can be gratified with Free Trade in the cheap, because dishonestly acquired, products of such labour.

Such is the evil which I am deprecating in its simple character, without exaggeration or deduction. It has its coverings for defence and ornament, under which it is an admired member of the Free-Trade club. These coverings require to be examined, like the pockets of a smuggler, who is another spurious free trader. There are, likewise, practices and consequences to be examined, which, if I am not greatly

mistaken, must prove that the newly-admitted and cherished member is really an enemy in disguise.

In the first place, there is an all-covering cloak of assumed principle. Free Trade is a blessing to the world at large, and any restriction, which expediency may seem to call for, must be an infraction of principle, and an injustice to many for the benefit of a few. *Fiat justitia ruat cœlum.* There can be neither exception nor compromise.

If we exclude the commodities of the largest producers in the world we are driving away our customers, and injuring our own merchants and manufacturers, from the largest British capitalist to the poorest factory child. Charity begins at home; and we must not injure our own poor out of morbid philanthropy to the African slave, who, as we are told, is far better off than they.

To these fallacious arguments in favour of slavery and the Slave Trade, as members of the Free-Trade Association, must be added the equally fallacious arguments which are used to diminish the importance and weight of the evils and sufferings which have proceeded from the favour and protection which Free-Trade supremacy has given to the system of slavery. The ruined British planter who employs paid labourers is told that free labour must be cheaper than that of slaves; which is, indeed, poor consolation to him, when his own experience has taught him a practical refutation of the theory. It is something like saying to one who has been robbed, wounded and stripped, and left helpless on the road, that honesty is the best policy, and there leaving him. Some late punishment may overtake the robber, and prove the truth of the axiom; but this is neither help nor consolation to the robbed and wounded man, more especially if he see the Levite who thus addressed him hasten after the robber, not to apprehend him, but to buy some of the stolen articles. Again, it is said—Do not hint that slave labour is cheaper than that of freemen: this will injure the cause of freedom. You will never persuade other nations to emancipate their slaves if you suffer this to transpire. This is really saying—You

must not whisper that in the ear which has already been proclaimed on the housetop. The universal distress and very general ruin of our own planters must render the misnamed free trader of Cuba and Brazil sceptical to any assertion that paid labour is cheaper than unpaid.

Although, amongst the various advocates of Free Trade, with whom I have conversed on this subject, I have not met with a single reply which went to the denial that this application of Free-Trade principles had a direct influence in encouraging the Slave Trade and slavery, and in aggravating the atrocities of both; and though none have attempted to refute the assertion, that the competition of the products of stolen and unpaid labour with those of the free and paid labourer is strictly analogous with that of stolen goods competing against such as are legitimately obtained; yet many ingenious replies have been given to blink or evade these two simple facts. Thus, it is urged, that if full play were allowed to the Slave Trade it would destroy itself by overstocking the labour market, and rendering slaves unnecessary. Centuries of experience in the African Transatlantic Slave Trade have shewn no such tendency, except in some parts of the United States, where the slaves have participated in the natural increase of the population, and where the falling off in the productiveness of the labour in which the slaves were engaged has introduced the breeding of slaves for other markets. In other slave colonies, in which the slaves are worked up, the largest influx would not prevent future demand, any more than the large supplies of oxen, sheep, and horses which are continually brought to London will eventually cause such a supply of calves from Milk-street, of sheep from Lamb's-Conduit-street, and of colts and hacks from Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, that the farmers of Essex, of the South Downs, and of Yorkshire, will be quite put out of the market. It is urged, no doubt with perfect truth, that many and serious evils have cooperated to produce pecuniary difficulty and distress in the West Indies, and that there is great room for improvement, not only in the West-Indian systems of finance and economy,

but also in the modes of culture and manufacture. But when this concession is admitted to the full, it must also be stated, that there are many West Indians to whom the accusation does not apply, and to whom, when it is addressed, it is only to add insult to injury. There are many proprietors who reside on their estates; who administer them with prudence and kindness; who have been economical in their personal expenses, but liberal in the application of capital for the introduction of improvement and the payment of labour; but who, nevertheless, have locked up or sunk their capital, and who, deprived of confidence by the recent changes, are reduced to a state of helpless poverty. Some, to obtain advances, are willing to submit to such onerous conditions as must be fatal to success, and virtually defeat the operation of any alteration of the Navigation Laws, and of other wise and liberal changes.

The remedy which the distressed planters are told that they have in their own hands, if they will adopt better systems, employ more capital, administer it with economy, and take advantage of all the assistance which chemical and mechanical science can supply, by no means meets the present difficulty. First, the depression of the planters has placed it out of their power to adopt many parts of this good advice; and secondly, if it were of the most easy adoption, it would not remove the difficulty which is complained of, viz. that of the British planter paying for his labour, and competing with the Foreigner who employs the unpaid labour of slaves, seeing that all the facilities and advantages recommended to the British colonist are still more accessible to the slave owner, who has already, to a great degree, availed himself of them. In fact, the slave owner can have the best machinery, with no humane restrictions to limit the duration of the manual labour essential to co-operate with it. You seem to me to be met by a dilemma which it is impossible to evade. In sanctioning and encouraging the slave labour of the Foreigner the principles of Free Trade are violated against the British planter, whose labour-market is restricted. This may benefit the

British manufacturer, in somewhat extending his market; but in reference to the injury, which it must do to his fellow-subjects in the colonies, he should recollect the precept, *sic utere tuo ut alienum non lædas.* To the statesman, who should see the interests of the country in no one particular class, but in the concurrent prosperity of colonists and manufacturers, the precept might be modified, and read thus, *sic faveas alieno ut tuum non lædas.*

In order to remove all the objections which the colonist may urge as to his being brought into the Free-Trade market encumbered with restrictions as to the employment of labour, you are driven upon the opposite horn of the dilemma, and compelled to give up to the British colonist the unrestricted employment of Slave Labour and unlimited dealings in the slave markets. I believe that of the Free Traders themselves some would blush, and others turn pale, in adopting such a measure.

But the cause of humanity is not served, and guilty participation in slavery and the Slave Trade is not avoided, by keeping on our statutes laws against both, for the restriction and injury of our fellow-subjects, whilst we are the cognizant and willing abettors of the worst foreign delinquents, both before and after the fact. In short, if Free Trade require that we must be supplied either by British or by Foreign slave owners, it would be more merciful to prefer the former; since, if not more humane in themselves, they can at least be watched and restrained. I really fear that when foreign nations look at our recent Acts, and remember by whom they have been carried, they will be ready to exclaim—"It has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'the dog is returned to his vomit again, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.'"

I think I have said enough to expose the deformity of the slave-working member of the Free-Trade club, as well as the character of his habiliments, to which the few scalp locks on the dress of an Indian warrior are but a trifle. I have now to shew that the acts of this new member prove him to be an enemy in disguise, perhaps the worst enemy who at

this moment impedes the progress of the British manufacturer and merchant.

In the healthful and remunerative operations of free labour, as well as in those of legitimate but unrestricted commerce, there is a sensible, and more or less rapid, advance in those who are engaged in them. Thus, notwithstanding the occasional causes of temporary severe distress, which accident or mismanagement may have induced, we see that there has been a conspicuous advance in the moral, intellectual, and physical condition of British operatives. This is not merely seen in the great elevation of a few individuals of extraordinary genius or industry, but is conspicuous in the majority as a class. Those who are engaged in the manufacture of one article become, to a large amount, the consumers of others, and the purchasers of a large proportion of the foreign productions imported by the merchant. Even the free labourer in our West-Indian colonies, but recently emancipated from the state of slavery, has his physical condition so much improved by the many articles of necessity and comfort which he procures for himself, as to have rendered the aggregate of imports into the West Indies far greater just before the occurrence of the present distress than they ever were during the most lucrative days of the planters' prosperity in the time of slavery. The case of the Cuban and the Brazilian slaves is very different. There is no more progressive improvement in them, as a class, than in that of the working bees whose native sweets their labour has superseded. Shut up in pens at night, and turned into the field by day, they consume the minimum of the coarsest food and clothing which is necessary to enable their masters to obtain from them the largest amount of unrequited service. They advance only in misery, degradation, and crime. The wages withheld from them, and of which a large amount would, in all probability, be spent on articles which British manufacturers and merchants would make and supply, are dishonestly withheld by the master, who, with a portion, undersells the honest planter in the British market into which the patrons of Free Trade have

introduced him, and drives away the improving customers which the emancipated slaves have become. Another portion, which the slave owner retains for himself, is devoted to personal gratifications, and renders little service to science or commerce. Of the small portion which finds its way into the market for the purchase of British manufactures, no inconsiderable part is destined for the coast of Africa, to keep up the supply of stolen labour, and to maintain that nefarious traffic which prevents the development of the resources of Africa, and does incalculable injury to the British merchant and manufacturer, by nearly excluding them from the largest and most profitable market which it yet remains for the world to open to them. To this market British enterprise would long since have found its way, but for the destructive influence of the Slave Trade, and the injurious restrictions on legitimate commerce. When Free Trade had removed these obstacles, the door to Africa might have been opened, had not Free Trade taken a new associate, the genius of *Slavery*, by the arm, and been turned aside into paths of disgrace and loss.

There are a few considerations which bear on West-Indian affairs, and on the measures proposed for their relief, which I have not thought fit to notice in the preceding remarks, which were specially designed to explain my reasons for thinking that Slave Labour can never become the legitimate client of Free Trade. The following observations will be chiefly directed against some of the arguments designed to weigh with the British public, and employed by those who are hostile both to the West Indies and to Africa.

If we exclude slave-made sugar, how can we admit slave-grown cotton, and other articles, the produce of Slave Labour? I admit the inconsistency, and regret that our free operatives should be dependent on the labour of slaves for the supply of their raw material; but this does not justify a retrograde movement, and a further dereliction of principle by the admission of an article once effectually excluded, and which, so far from being necessary for the maintenance of any great

branch of national industry, chiefly recommends itself by cheapening a most childlike and questionable indulgence.

The two cases are not so nearly parallel as they may be supposed to be. The retrograde movement in favour of slave-grown sugar stimulates the African Slave Trade, aggravates the sufferings of the Cuban and Brazilian slave, and retards the cause of freedom by wittingly injuring the free labourer and his employer. But the use of cotton as at present grown gives no stimulus to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and is associated with a not unreasonable hope that the production of cotton by slaves is drawing to a close, seeing that both in Egypt and in the United States the cause of freedom is advancing, whilst a simultaneous effort is being made to obtain a supply of free-grown cotton from other quarters.

It has been said that England, having paid the twenty millions of compensation for the emancipated slaves, is absolved from all further claims upon her by the colonists: but to this it may be objected, first, that the twenty millions were but a part of the amount invested in slaves; consequently, that the colonists have still a loss to bear on this part of their property. It may be urged that, having profited by the unrighteous employment of slaves for many years, they ought not to complain at participating in the loss and inconvenience which going into the right path may for some time occasion. But what is to be said if the loss exceed this, and a still greater reduction of capital be occasioned by the forced depreciation of estates, buildings, and machinery? The planter so injured is nearly in the same situation in which one of your large cotton spinners would be if he were obliged to sell the boiler of his engine, and then were prevented from replacing it. All his valuable machinery would be rendered useless to him. Would the paltry price of the boiler be compensation for such a tremendous change of circumstances?

Again, it is said, if the planters had merely invested the capital which the compensation-money placed in their hands, they would, from this source alone, be enjoying a

larger income than they now represent themselves as receiving; consequently, they must be suffering from some mismanagement of their own. Probably no inconsiderable portion of the compensation-money went to pay off old mortgages, or was otherwise withheld from the colonies; but after making all such deductions, very considerable sums must have come into the hands of solvent planters, by whom large investments have been made upon their estates, for the purpose of introducing the improvements which mechanics and chemistry have offered, and from which they hoped to derive an advantageous return when conjoined with free labour, which the theorists had repeatedly and strenuously asserted would be more lucrative, as well as more moral, than that of Slave Labour.

Not only has much of the compensation-money been so spent, but a large addition of capital, derived from other sources, has been applied to the introduction of improvements, or to the working of estates which had ceased to be remunerative in the transition state. Nor ought we to blame the planter for his persevering struggle, since he might justly expect ultimate success, and rely upon a remunerating price maintained by that preference upon which the mother country, by established usage as well as by her expressed assurances, had permitted him to depend.

No inconsiderable portion of the planters' outlay has been spent in labour, wages, and machinery, and has contributed to produce the large increase of exports from this country into the West Indies; and a very great falling off in these exports, as well as in the imports from the colonies, must be the inevitable and pernicious result of the favour shewn to slavery under the delusive guise of Free Trade.

It is likewise urged by those who are opposed to placing any restrictions in the way of slave-holding planters for the sake either of the slave or of the British colonist, that the difficulties of our West-Indian fellow-subjects have little or nothing to do with the recent Free-Trade movements; that they are of very long standing; and that these colonists were old complainers long before emancipation was thought

of, and when the African Slave Trade was encouraged rather than restricted; and that differential duties are a delusive assistance, which it would be advantageous to the favoured party to withdraw.

I will not attempt to exonerate the colonists from past errors of omission and commission, with which they are charged, though I do not like the practice of abusing the fallen; nor will I retort upon the men and measures which the Home Government has inflicted upon these colonists, to their lasting injury. But making every concession to those who very reasonably urge that perfectly fair competition is the best stimulus to exertion, I can neither abandon my position, that the competition of unpaid labour is essentially unjust, nor cease to insist that it is really an act of cruelty to take the crutch from a lame man when escaping from danger, although, under other circumstances, it might be best to induce him to lay it aside, and, by well-directed exercise, endeavour to recover his soundness. Free Trader as I am, I should rejoice to see our West-Indian colonies brought into that healthy condition in which, profiting by all the inherent resources with which nature has blessed them, and by the aids of practical science which the mother country could lend them, they might challenge the honest and fair competition of all the other tropical countries; and I am fully persuaded, that, with cautious and well-directed effort, this is not an unattainable result. But I am equally sure that most of the expedients which have been advocated by merchants, Protectionists, or Free Traders, can only add signal failure to the other serious evils which attend them. Among the most remarkable of these are the measures which are advocated in an article of the "Examiner," which is so deficient in the candour, accuracy, and sound reasoning which are wont to characterize the pages of that excellent paper, that I strongly suspect that the learned Editor had, on that occasion, been induced to confide his pen to some unworthy substitute.

His great remedy for West-Indian distress is immigration; but what immigration—if the comfort of the immigrants, the due proportion of the sexes, their protection

from oppression and injustice, and their liberty to return, are secured—can, on the ground of expense alone, bear any competition with Slave Labour?

Emigration from Africa to the West Indies is placed on a par with that of the Irish to America, though that of the Irishman is perfectly voluntary, paid at his own expense, and at times so earnestly desired, that, when means are wanting, he has been known to secrete himself on board the emigrant vessel, to obtain his passage by stealth. Not so the poor Africans. Such is their horror of the idea of Transatlantic exile, that they have been often known to throw themselves overboard, with the certainty before them that they would immediately be devoured by sharks. The concurrent testimony of the best-informed witness has shewn that, with very few exceptions, there are no free men on the western coast of Africa who could become voluntary emigrants. Even the Kroo-men, who approach the nearest to this description, cannot emigrate without the consent of their headmen, and then would only undertake a limited period of service, unaccompanied by their wives. It is evident, that, up to the period of their being put on board of the British transports, the majority of African emigrants would in all respects resemble the slaves sold to the Cuban merchants: their mode of capture, and their purchase, would be the same. Of such emigrants the "Examiner" proposes to send 30,000 annually to the West Indies, and then says—"Whether this would or would not encourage the Slave Trade in Africa is more than we can say;" and adds—"It is not to be supposed that our peddling operations on a few spots of the coast are likely very much to affect, for good or evil, the civilization of a continent that contains hundreds of nations and hundreds of languages, and a surface equal to one-fourth part of the habitable globe." Yet it is well known that the Slave Trade, without this official sanction and stimulus, has been a curse to the coast of Africa, extending its baneful influence far into the interior, not merely to the exclusion of true religion and legitimate commerce, but obliterating the traces of ancient Egyptian civilization. This process, if the "Ex-

aminer's" views are carried out, is to be continued, until the West Indies are glutted with cheap labour, "when even West-Indian slavery itself will die a natural death." The animus of the writer may be appreciated from the following quotation:—"Exeter Hall is silent, and has nothing new to propose for our mystification and misleading." Surely the mystification and misleading are his own. *Turpe est doctori, cum culpa redarguit ipsum.*

Government aid, in the shape of loans or guarantees, appears to be liable to serious objections, were no opposition raised against it by the British public on the ground of its increasing the expenses of the Government at a most inconvenient period for the finances of the country. The boon, however liberal, could not be desired by the true friends of the West Indies. Such temporary aid to persons in embarrassed circumstances affords, indeed, a gratifying respite from present suffering, and postpones the introduction of painful but salutary reforms, but leaves a permanent increase of incumbrance which augments the distress to be more keenly felt when the transient succour is exhausted. It would scarcely be possible to avoid mistake and expense in the application of such assistance.

Even the undertaking of large public improvements at the expense of the Government would, in almost every instance, be liable to objection, since such works, being for the most part performed with less economy than those which are of a more private character, would have a tendency to produce a temporary and partial abundance of money, which would disturb the price of labour, and interfere with those economical reforms which are of the greatest importance.

Although I have been induced to take the small part which I have borne in maintaining the cause of our suffering West-Indian fellow-subjects from the conviction that their distress offers a strong appeal for our sympathy, and in the belief that they are labouring under injustice which demands redress, I could never concur with those West Indians and Protectionists of the old school, who regard, as essential, a high protecting duty, to enable them to pur-

sue the manufacture of sugar in spite of defective processes and financial abuses, to the great annoyance and expense of the British public. All I would ask, in the name of justice and humanity, is, merely so much of protection as shall guard the producer, whether proprietor or labourer, against dishonest competition, and save this country from the guilt and disgrace of retracing its arduous steps for the abolition of the Slave Trade and the emancipation of slaves, to become the patron and advocate of the African Slave Trade and of Colonial Slavery in their worst forms. Up to this point let Free-Trade principles bear their undisputed sway; and I believe with you that the West Indies, in common with other parts of the world, would thrive under their invigorating influence. But salutary changes may be made with incautious and destructive rapidity: and just as I have known a young medical man of promise sacrifice his life by sudden transition from a system of care and warmth to one which adopted the various appliances of bracing cold, so your principles cannot with safety be at once with rigour enforced upon the manifestly invalided West-Indian constitution. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to plead for the temporary continuance of some accustomed indulgence. It must be well known to those who have paid attention to West-Indian affairs that many planters have carried on their operations by means of borrowed capital. The borrower and the lender relied on the security of a remunerative price of sugar; but whilst enjoying a privilege almost amounting to a monopoly, the planter was, not only by law but by other circumstances, subjected to injurious restraints, both upon his manufacturing processes, which barred improvement, and also on the mode of the disposal of his produce, precluding him, as a man of business, from taking advantage of the best markets, and tending to perpetuate the continuance of vicious systems. Such obstacles to success, it is hoped, may very shortly be removed; but as capital will be wanted to give efficiency to the best measures which perfect reform can introduce, there seems to be strong reason, in addition to that urged by humanity to the African, for permitting such a modified extension

of the old privilege, for a limited period, as may serve to sanction the renewal of that confidence, the cessation of which has put a stop to advances, and allowed the bounty of Providence, in abundant harvests, to be wholly lost. By granting this succour, which I take to be understood, though not expressed, in the motion of Joseph Hume, whose Free-Trade principles you will not dispute, no expense will be incurred by Government, and very few advances would be made, except such as may afford a fair prospect of maintaining or restoring those concerns which can be conducted to profit; for capitalists would not make advances without an investigation of the state of the borrowers. Your own principles would thus have the opportunity of recommending themselves by success, which would not be the case if you crush the West-India colonies, leaving them to remain, like St. Domingo, an opprobrium to the friends of Africa and freedom; handing over their pauperized masters, discontented and desponding, to the expensive charities of England; and surrendering the best market in the world to the most oppressive of slave owners, and the most remorseless of avaricious adventurers.

I feel so perfectly convinced that the great principles of Free Trade call for no such tremendous sacrifices, and that there is an error in the arguments in support of them which would lead to consequences as injurious to the mother country as to the colonies, that I have been induced to address this long Letter to thee. I might say more in favour of the West Indies, and much more in favour of Africa, to which it behoves the friends of English manufacturers and commerce to look for the best and largest market which can be substituted for those which are already almost closed against them.

Sincerely participating in the respect and gratitude which thou hast inspired in the minds of an enlightened people,

I remain,

Thine truly,

(Signed) THOMAS HODGKIN.

Brook Street, 18. 3*mo.* 1848.

W. Watts, Crown Court, Temple Bar.